

In the mid-1980s my family moved to Bulgaria. My father worked for the State Department. At the time it was a hard-line Communist nation; few of the social or political reforms (or schisms) that took place in Yugoslavia, Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia during the Sixties and Seventies took hold in Bulgaria. One of the closest allies of the Soviet Union, all Bulgarian children were required to learn Russian at school, prominent sites all over the capital Sofia, where we lived, were named in honor of the Soviet Union (the “Hotel Moskva,” “Rousski Boulevard,” and the “Monument of Russian Liberators” still come to mind). Conservative analysts of Eastern Bloc at that time noted that of all the East European ruling parties, the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP) “demonstrated the most consistent loyalty to the Soviet Union.”¹ It was rumored that Todor Zhivkov (who led the Bulgarian Communist Party for more than three decades and was in power longer than any other Soviet-bloc leader) once offered to make Bulgaria a part of the Soviet Union. An epigraph in a guidebook I still have to Sofia’s cultural heritage notes (for those who did not know already): “The fascist hangmen tried to turn Sofia into a graveyard of revolutionaries, instead it became the pantheon of the revolution that triumphed.” The shop you bought your bread in might be next to the House of Fighters Against Fascism and Capitalism.

Everything was political in Bulgaria. The Party, nationalism, and the entertainment and arts commingled in everyday life. It was state policy that the broad fields of artistic endeavor serve revolutionary aims. While an official policy on cultural expression provides an immediate, obvious, and direct opportunity for dissent, resistance to the political authority of the state was no easy task. Under Zhivkov’s leadership, members of the cultural intelligentsia—architects, designers, writers—were courted and rewarded by the state with an array of financial and personal privileges. Partaking, participating with the state apparatus repeatedly and over time, was a journey that left many, as one Bulgarian author, noted drained of their “distinctive creative identity.”² The writer Georgi Markov made it more plain when he said: “They don’t pay us to write, they pay us not to write.”³ If raising members of the cultural intelligentsia to the ranks of the elite didn’t serve to inoculate them of their dissident fervor there were, of course, other more permanent solutions. Markov, who left Bulgaria in 1969 and continued his dissident activities in England, discovered this when he was assassinated by the Bulgarian secret police in 1978.

Although state-sponsored television (the only kind) was broadcast for just a few hours a day (and even then was used mostly to provide updates on the latest five-year plan and news that the boot factory in Plovdiv had once-again met and exceeded its annual production quota), the American cartoon “The Flintstones” was dubbed into Bulgarian and broadcast several nights a week. The cartoon was thought a depiction of American workers who, confined by the strictures of capitalism, labored in jobs that exploited them, their revolutionary instincts blunted by their desire for material rewards: a gargantuan brontosaurus steak, a new foot-powered car, or a night on the town at the bowling alley. Wilma and Betty, confined to the home by the gender divisions that helped sustain the capitalist labor market, were to be pitied. It was, all in all, not an entirely ridiculous interpretation.⁴

Amid this cultural battle between east and west (at a time when those stood in for capitalism and communism), Bulgarian architecture, rather than calling on the long and rich cultural heritage of a state with over a thousand years of history, was decidedly modern. International Style city planning was everywhere, with tall apartment blocks set among large green spaces. High-rises, the result not of density or high real estate costs but the cultural weight attached to them, were employed for hotels, office towers, and luxury apartment buildings for the *nomenklatura*. Often positioned near major traffic arteries, these buildings were cast as testaments to the technological finesse of Bulgarian architects and engineers. Just as skyscrapers are seen as proxies for prosperity in the United States, so too were they in Bulgaria. Despite the phenomenal cultural, political, economic, and social differences between Bulgaria and the west, the rhetoric of modernism was surprisingly similar. History books celebrated Bulgaria's "new architecture...pure forms, glass and aluminum."⁵ One such glass box tower located near our apartment was kept lit every night as a symbol of Bulgarian modernity, in spite of the fact that the surrounding neighborhood was pitch black due to chronic electricity shortages. Modern architecture was an index of the success of Communism, of the forward progress of Bulgarian history. As one survey of the nation's architecture, in a mouthful, put it: "Modern Bulgarian architecture was born in the spirit of the 9th of September Uprising, after the defeat of capitalism and fascism and was and continues to be inspired by the drive for socialist construction."⁶ What would have passed for corporate modernism in New York was at the same time in Sofia the modernism of the Party. Context made all the difference in the world.

When a few years later we moved to Romania, I saw architecture was similarly deployed for complex purposes. Nicolae Ceaușescu's architects and builders demolished hundreds of historic buildings, replacing them with monumental structures he thought were a testament to Romania's (and his) greatness. This process operated in fits and starts until the earthquake of 1977 provided a rationale for widespread demolition and rebuilding. It reached a crescendo in the final decade of Ceaușescu's regime; a 1989 report sponsored by the World Monuments Fund noted: "During the past six years large areas of old Bucharest have been destroyed almost in their entirety and rebuilt....Simultaneously approximately 30 towns throughout the country have been razed and rebuilt according to new principles enacted by decree."⁷ Bit by bit, building by building, the history that did not fit into the narrative of a revolutionary Romania was demolished and displaced by structures that ostensibly did. The centerpiece of this rebuilding effort was the Casa Poporului ("the House of the People"), a massive government headquarters with gold ceilings and 40-foot solid oak doors. The second largest building in the world (the first is the Pentagon), it was material evidence of the madness of the "Genius of the Carpathians" (as Ceaușescu liked to be called). 50,000 families had their housing demolished to make room for it. Churches, hospitals, and much more were destroyed to make way for this gargantuan behemoth with its bizarre amalgamation of styles. 100,000 workers labored on its construction and the natural resources of the nation were plundered to clad its interiors in fine woods, crystal, gold, and marble. Only the vehicles of Ceaușescu's motorcade were allowed on the Boulevard to the Victory of Socialism that led to the entrance. After the revolution, one popular pastime for Romanians was to drive up and down this road to nowhere.

The metro entrance gaped at our feet like a huge open mouth. We had read that the metro entrances of Bucharest were also entry points into Ceaușescu's maze of tunnels, a secret subterranean network constructed to outlast even nuclear war....The underground network

was reputed to be thousands of miles long, multilayered, a complicated nervous system whose exact shape and direction no one single person knew. Architects who had worked on portions of the system had been killed. When I told a poet friend that I could not think of anything similar in the modern world, he said: “I can...the Romanian mind after forty-five years of dictatorship.”

--Andrei Codrescu⁸

Marx wrote that the traditions of all the dead generations weigh like a nightmare on the brain of the living. In Bucharest it wasn't just the minds of the living that were haunted: the city itself was haunted by the ceaseless tradition of demolitions and building that fortified Ceaușescu's regime and gave it form. Just as the totality of the construction project was thought known to no single individual, the scope of destruction was difficult to know; the number of houses razed in Bucharest was “considered a state secret.”⁹ While Ceaușescu ruled, Romanians lamented “We are dreams in the mind of a madman.”¹⁰ Now Ceaușescu is dead, executed with his hated wife Elena in a grim courtyard of his own preferred design; but his built empire survives. Disassembling something so vast would mean dismantling the very commercial, industrial, and domestic infrastructure of the nation. Appropriated now to different groups and tasks (former palaces house the “new” ruling elite, composed mostly of ageing former *nomenklatura*, apparatchiks, and Securitate thugs; the Casa Poporului houses offices of the two chambers of Parliament and a museum), these structures nevertheless carry the weight of history and pass on that burden. Nearly every block contains reminders of the tyrannical past, either in the form of the regime's buildings, or in absences—the demolished churches, synagogues, houses, cafes, museums, and on and on. Ceaușescu and his architects butchered swaths of Bucharest, building in the newly-clear cut old quarter structures “whose only achievement,” as one Romanian architect summarized, “is the celebration of the power of having done so.”¹¹ Even Baron von Haussmann and Napoleon III would have been impressed by the scale and scope of the undertaking.

My own understanding of the relationship between politics and architecture was profoundly shaped by the experience of living in societies where buildings spoke to all who passed by or entered not just of aesthetics or history, but of the very systems that governed their lives. Buildings weren't symbols, they were forces—active participants—in the creation of the hegemony whose influence extended throughout every aspect of life. In this environment, as one Romanian architectural historian put it, “It's quite frivolous to talk only about style or the details of that building, when you know that people were being killed because of that building.”¹² Indeed, as Luminița Machedon and Ernie Scoffham point out, of all the developments in Bucharest that “scar its soul,” the built environment “this last legacy—and all its connotations, the memories and the inhumanities that accompanied Ceaușescu's dictatorship from 1965 to 1989—is the hardest to bear, because it happened within most people's lifetime and because the buildings, the physical artifacts, will not go away.” Buildings weigh on the brain of the living, and Ceaușescu was not the only one to understand this.

The buildings of New York are thousands of miles from Bucharest or Sofia and they were shaped by a radically different society. The differences between the New York of the Great Depression and at the start of the 21st century alone are staggering. However, similar impulses exist between the forces that shaped the skylines here and there, then and now. Hilde Heynen writes that “It is my belief that modern architecture *has* the capacity to

articulate in a very specific way the contradictions and ambiguities that modern life confronts us with.”¹³ While I am sure she was not referring to the seemingly contradictory embrace of modern architecture as a symbol of both capitalism and communism throughout the 20th century, her point resonates with that fact nonetheless. While walking down Park Avenue today, one can hear the voices of those who say we are now residing in a non-ideological world; that the contest of the Cold War is over and we (or rather capitalism) won.

Conservative commentators now describe ideology much as would orthodox Marxists from the other side of the Iron Curtain twenty years ago: as something standing in for the truth, as a form of false consciousness. Capitalism then is no longer ideological, but the truth of the way the world works; post-modern culture no longer labors under the weight of ideology, but is free to express true artistic desire. Alan Balfour, ruminating on the future of Berlin at the start of the 21st century writes: “Now, relieved of the burdens and uniforms of ideologies, architecture has been freed to represent and enhance the myriad mysteries of existence.”¹⁴ Yet Walter Benjamin reminds us, for art’s sake is a flag under which sails a cargo whose name cannot be declared.

Here I am in agreement with Sharon Zukin who writes: “We owe the clearest cultural map of structural change not to novelists or literary critics but to architects and designers.”¹⁵ Any study of architecture in the United States must acknowledge the point that architecture materializes the conditions of its creation. Far from being artifacts, however, buildings and the meaning we attach to them do not remain static. The agendas that were the impetus for the Empire State Building no longer define the building for contemporary audiences. Similarly, the Cold War context so crucial to understanding the Seagram Building today is for many merely a memory; while the form remains the same, new stories, myths, and interpretations have been layered onto Mies’ classical geometries.

Introducing students to design and its history is a complex task. Its development in the United States, as elsewhere, was neither wholly independent of political and economic influences nor wholly dependent on them. Rather, architecture develops, in the words of Nancy Stieber, “as a semiautonomous factor within a dynamic theater of social relations.”¹⁶ The goal of my instruction in the discipline is to describe how architecture—as a form of aesthetic expression and as a social practice—was transformed in the rich and varied American context (economic, cultural, and political) over the course of the twentieth century. This transformation occurred within historically contingent opportunities and constraints, and while the final product of that transformation, the buildings themselves, are well known, the tensions between opportunity and constraint that shaped them often are not. “Those tensions,” to quote Nancy Stieber again, “are what the historian can and must try to describe.”¹⁷

One recent effort to do just that is Annabel Jane Wharton’s study of the relationship between politics, architecture, and the Cold War in the construction of Hilton Hotels. Wharton writes describes how executives and designers at Hilton believed that modern architecture was one of the “most convincing demonstrations of the vitality of American culture.”¹⁸ Conrad Hilton, founder of the corporation, insisted that modern architecture was a weapon the United States must deploy in its battle with Communism: “We mean these hotels as a challenge – not to the peoples who have so cordially challenged us into their midst – but to the way of life preached by the Communist world.”¹⁹ After World War II, in an era when, according to Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “American architecture has come to

occupy a position of special prominence in the world,” it is crucial, as Wharton notes, to understand its role in the construction of “American identity and self-representation.” My hope is that we can teach architecture as an effort to understand these concerns at multiple sites, remembering her caveat that politics are embedded in architecture, and that the effects of this “continue when you aren’t looking.”²⁰

¹ John D. Bell, *The Bulgarian Communist Party from Blagoev to Zhivkov* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Press, 1986), x.

² Atanas Slavov, *The “Tham” in Bulgarian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), p. 124.

³ Georgi Markov, *Zodochni Reportazhe za Bulgari* (Zurich, 1980), vol.1, p. 312.

⁴ Generally speaking, specific kinds of movies and programming from the west were shown with some regularity in Bulgaria. Like *The Flintstones*, however, these were expected to depict the negative consequences of life under a capitalist regime.

⁵ Vladimir Topechnarov, ed., *Sofia* (Sofia: Sofia Press, 1979), pp. 220-221. This was published on the “Occasion of Sofia’s 100th Anniversary as the Nation’s Capital and the 1300th Anniversary of the Bulgarian State.”

⁶ Yordan S. Tangurov, ed., *The Architecture of Modern Bulgaria* (Sofia: Technika State Publishing House, 1972), p. 10.

⁷ Dinu Giurescu, *The Razing of Romania’s Past*, (Washington, D.C. : U.S. Committee, International Council on Monuments and Sites, 1989), ii.

⁸ Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag*, p. 20.

⁹ Giurescu, *The Razing of Romania’s Past*, p. 48.

¹⁰ Codrescu, *The Hole in the Flag*, p. 21.

¹¹ Dana Harhoiu, quoted in Luminița Machedon and Ernie Scoffham *Romanian Modernism: The Architecture of Bucharest, 1920-1940* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 320.

¹² Augustin Ioan, quoted in Scott Heller, “East Meets West in Art History,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* vol. XLV, no. 49 (13 August 1999): A18-A19.

¹³ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999), p. 7.

¹⁴ Alan Balfour, *Berlin: The Politics of Order* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 244.

¹⁵ Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power: From Detroit to Disneyland* (1991), p. 39.

¹⁶ Nancy Stieber, *Housing Design and Society in Amsterdam: Reconfiguring Urban Order and Identity, 1900-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Annabel Jane Wharton, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 11.